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ABSTRACT

While the World Wide Web receives most of the publicity, another aspect of the Internet also draws considerable attention. IRC, more formally referred to as Internet Relay Chat, provides a means by which one user can type a message in real time to one or more Internet users, and almost instantaneously, the message appears on the monitors of all the others who are monitoring the transmission. This ERIC Digest summarizes the details regarding IRC and discusses the educational benefits of its use. Discussion includes: potential educational uses of IRC; technological requirements; the organization of IRC; Nets; channels; operators; nicknames; finding, joining, or creating a channel; sending private messages; exiting and IRC chat; disadvantages of IRC; educational benefits; and references, suggested readings, and topic-related Web sites. (DLS)

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Clearinghouse on Information & Technology

ERIC DIGEST

January 1999 EDO-IR-99-01

Internet Relay Chat

by Carol Simpson

While the World Wide Web receives most of the publicity, another aspect of the Internet also draws considerable attention. IRC, more formally referred to as Internet Relay Chat, provides a means by which one user can type a message in real time to one or more Internet users, and almost instantaneously, the message appears on the monitors of all the other users who are monitoring the transmission. They, in turn, can type messages that all the others may read. These electronic "conversations" run the gamut from general chit-chat to exchanges of highly specific scientific or technical information, to conversations between school children and guest authorities.

Why use Internet Relay Chat?

In the educational arena, individuals from distant places frequently need to discuss plans, projects or theories. Several teachers in different states may wish to collaborate on a workshop that will be presented at a national conference. A group of educators taking a class at a university may wish to "hear" a guest "speaker" via the Internet. Perhaps a class of elementary students wants to discuss a joint project with a partner classroom across the country or even across an ocean. A high school class might wish to arrange a "visit" from a noted author or scientist. IRC can accomplish all of these goals without the problems and expenses associated with conference calls or physical travel.

IRC allows participants to contribute to discussions on an equal basis. Each person types "comments" that the entire group can see. Should the situation require it, the chat environment also allows a user to type private comments, viewable by only one other participant. The IRC environment even allows files to be exchanged. IRC can also provide eyewitness accounts of major world events from revolutions to earthquakes and because most channels are open, students can hear first-hand accounts of newsworthy events.

What is required?

In order to use Internet Relay Chat (IRC), the user must have an Internet connection. The connection can be dial-up or direct. After the Internet connection is in place, a software package allows users to connect to the IRC server's special computers reserved for interactive conversations. The most popular IRC chat software for PCs, *mIRC*, is a shareware program that puts IRC servers and advanced IRC features as close as the click of a mouse. *Pirch* is a newcomer, and has enthusiastic users. Macintosh users usually select *Homer* or *Ircle* as their software program of choice. Any of these programs allow users to log onto IRC servers, join channels, and exchange live conversation. Some of the programs support such advanced features as sound files or color coded text. Another useful feature, supported by some software programs, is URL "catching." This feature will collect and/or automatically display any properly typed URL. This can be especially useful when a user wants to follow a professional discussion or any other seminar-type of chat. All URLs typed can be logged into a database for inspection later.

How is IRC organized?

Tens of thousands of people throughout the world may be using IRC at any given time. If all these people were to "talk" simultaneously, chaos would reign. Conversations between two people could be lost among the transmissions of all other people. To sort out the conversations, the Internet Relay Chat world has divided itself into Nets, or groups of chat servers, and each Net is again divided into channels. Choice of a Net will determine which channels will be available, but if the user cannot find a suitable channel, a new channel can be created. While there may be no modem police, IRCops and channel ops (operators) monitor their respective domains very carefully.

Nets

Each Net has its own personality. EfNet, the first IRCNet, and home to channels devoted to high-level computer discussions, is the largest, but it is also slow because of its sheer size. Unfortunately, there are also hundreds of "adult" oriented channels on EfNet and their descriptions are quite public. UnderNet sprang from EfNet. It is smaller, more reliable, and friendlier, though many of the same channels exist on both EdNet and UnderNet. DALnet began as a gamers Net, but has expanded. It offers intrusion protection and registered nicknames. KidsWorld is a Net for those under 18. Adults must register upon entering, and security personnel supervise vigorously. All of these Nets and more are pre-configured in major IRC software packages.

Channels

When a user logs onto an IRC server (using appropriate IRC software), hundreds and maybe thousands of channels will be in operation. Each channel name is preceded by a # sign and each channel was created for the purposes of topical discussion. Typing "/list" will show every public channel on a particular net. Channels can be public or private, and moderated or unmoderated. Establishing a private channel is as simple as typing "/join" followed by an unused channel name starting with #. The channel will cease to exist when the last participant leaves the channel.

Ops

Each channel is controlled by an op(erator). The op is the person who creates the channel. The op has the power to configure the channel as moderated, invitation only, or according to several other parameters. The op can also kick (eject) or ban unruly users from the channel. The op also has the power to bestow op status on other users. In the list of channel members, ops are indicated by the @ sign in front of their names. The op is responsible for maintaining order on the channel and establishing ground rules for participants to follow. Ops realize that once they leave the channel, they lose op status unless someone with op power is left behind to restore the authority of the original op.

Nicks

Users on each channel are known by nicknames, or "nicks." A nickname can be a shortened version of one's own name (Tom_S), or it can be a fantasy name (BlkKnight). IRC programs have a limitation on the length of the nick, so abbreviations or truncations are common.

How do you find, join, or create a channel?

The command "/list" will generate a list of all current channels. To join any one of the channels, type: "/join #channelname", substituting the name of the desired channel (including the # sign) for "#channelname." Those who would like a private channel can create one quite easily. They simply type "/join #channelname", substituting the new channel name (including the # sign) for "#channelname." Private channels are advantageous for educational settings and class-to-class chats since the channel won't show on the channel list and outsiders won't be able to send off-topic messages.

Can you send a private message?

While most IRC messages go to a public area where anyone in the channel can view them, it is possible to send messages to a single person. Each software package has its own method of accomplishing this, but the standard command will always work. To send a private message to user Tom_S, one would type: "/msg Tom_S Are you receiving my message?" A separate window will open for this secondary conversation, and anything typed in the private window will go only to Tom_S. It's possible to maintain multiple private conversations simultaneously, at least to the capacity the human brain has to follow all the conversational threads.

How does one exit an IRC chat?

Leaving IRC is as simple as closing the window in which you have been chatting. Good netiquette requires that one announce one's departure.

What are the disadvantages of IRC?

IRC, a live activity, has some of the same problems encountered with live radio or live television. Technical problems can cause sessions to be terminated prematurely. Equipment or telecommunications failures on the Internet can cause what is known as a "net split" where one group of servers is cut off from another group. Each group will continue to converse within its own servers, but participants registered on a separated portion of the network will not be able to see the conversations of the other half. Of course, IRC participants on the same server will be able to converse no matter what happens to other IRC servers. For classroom projects, teachers would do well to plan in advance which server they will use, and agree to have all classes use the same server to eliminate these problems.

Anyone with an Internet connection can access IRC servers. For educational purposes, this means that anyone in the world can drop in on a classroom chat session. Outside visitors can be simple observers (a.k.a. "lurkers"), but some may be out to cause mischief and mayhem. Savvy Internet users can take over unprotected channels. Teachers creating IRC channels for classroom use must learn how to make a channel private, and how to "kick" or ban unwanted members.

Occasionally, an Internet user will "spam" unprotected channels. "Spam" is an unsolicited message broadcast to many channels at once. The channel op has the ability to configure the channel to reject messages from those outside the channel. Because many spam messages are "adult" in nature, this adjustment would be a wise stance.

What educational benefits can I expect?

IRC allows students and teachers to interact synchronously with live persons. These can be peers, mentors, or guests. Younger students who don't type well might ask an older student, parent, or teacher to type their questions and comments, so that physical limitations do not stand in the way of communication. Classes in remote locations, across town or around the world, can collaborate on joint projects. IRC is more immediate than e-mail exchanges because there is no need to wait a long time to receive a response. IRC also personalizes the Internet, which can sometimes seem cold and robotic. All in all, IRC environments provide an interactive, personal channel through which numerous varieties of communications can occur.

References, suggested readings, and topic related Web sites:

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